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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 001396

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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ACTIONS INCREASE TENSION WITH PM  
MALIKI

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Classified By: DCM Robert Ford for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: With the recent resignation of Iraq's Trade Minister following high-profile questioning by Parliament on corruption allegations, Parliament's budget maneuvers to restrict prime ministerial power, and indications that Parliament will continue questioning senior officials on corruption and malfeasance, Iraq's Parliament is emerging as an institution that can effectively check executive power. It also appears to be the latest arena for the high-stakes struggle between new CoR Speaker Ayad al-Samarraie and Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Anti-Maliki personalities suggest that the Prime Minister accepted the Trade Minister's resignation to cut his losses but retaliated by ordering arrests of Sunni politicians in Diyala and asking Parliament to lift the immunity of Sunni Arab MPs. Samarraie has clearly stolen some political momentum from Maliki, and Maliki loyalists fear Samarraie will methodically target the PM's allies in government in an effort to weaken the PM as national elections approach. Maliki's concern over his weakened political position may affect his willingness to travel to Washington while Parliament remains in session. End Summary.

Exercise of Oversight?

¶2. (C) Efforts in the Council of Representatives (COR) to question ministers on corruption and malfeasance continue, led by the newly elected Speaker, Ayad al-Samarraie, and encouraged by those parties -- Sunni, Shi'a and Kurds -- that elected Samarraie to lead the COR just one month ago. These efforts led to the May 25 resignation of Trade Minister Abd al Falah al-Sudani (septel), following intense public questioning of the minister on corruption charges, and Parliament will persist in investigating senior GOI officials. Several MPs described to poloffs the process of parliamentary questioning of ministers as "beautiful" and noted that such a display of "real democracy" against a government is unheard of in the Arab world. Newly elected Iraqi Islamic Party (IIP) Secretary General Osama Tikriti told us he had advised Samarraie to work with Maliki to ensure an effective anti-corruption agenda because it would be better for all of Iraq. Tikriti said Samarraie and Maliki have had a "couple of meetings," although he declined to characterize them.

¶3. (C) Many CoR members characterize Samarraie's leadership as strong, and applaud his handling of the process, although at least one (Sunni Arab) Hewan MP, Mustafa Hitti, suggested that Samarraie might be using the oversight card to strengthen the IIP. Kareem Yaqoobi (Fadhila ) Shi'a) also said that Samarraie was handling the process well. IIP members have indicated strong support for Samarraie, and some told us they favor an even more aggressive attack. IIP MP Abdal Karim al-Samarraie (no relation to the Speaker), told poloff that it was time to hold more ministers accountable for corruption. He insisted that Sudani's resignation was

unconstitutional and said the CoR would pursue a no-confidence vote against him despite the resignation, insisting that Sudani be held accountable. The Shi'a Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), in a May 24 statement, praised the CoR's questioning of executive officials as an example of MPs' following their constitutional obligations. Dawa, Dawa Tanzim and some ISCI/Badr MPs, however, have expressed opposition to further debate on Sudani's resignation, suggesting a desire to put an end to the issue.

Tit for Tat

¶4. (C) During a May 23 meeting, the Prime Minister's Political Advisor Sadiq Rikabi told Emboff that Parliament's anti-corruption efforts were directed at Maliki's State of Law Coalition. He repeated this allegation to the DCM on May 25. Rikabi said that the ministers in line for questioning (Trade, Oil, Transportation) were Maliki coalition ministers, and that the questioning was a strong-arm tactic by Samarraie personally. Rikabi and PM Chief of Staff Tariq Abdullah Nejm also told Emboffs that Maliki's planned trip to the U.S. might have to be delayed because the Prime Minister was reluctant to leave the country while this parliamentary debate was ongoing, presumably from concerns about increased parliamentary activity in his absence.

¶5. (C) On the other side, Saifaldin Abdul-Rahman (strictly protect) an advisor to DPM Rafi Essawi and VP Tariq al-Hashemi told poloff that Essawi had recently hosted Maliki and Samarraie for a meeting. During that meeting, Maliki told Samarraie that if he did not cease the questioning of ministers, Maliki would "go after his people." Abdul Rahman said Essawi believes the arrests in Diyala of newly elected Sunni local officials (reftel) are retaliation for Parliament's actions. On May 27 Samarraie described his

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meeting with Maliki to MNF-I POLAD. Samarraie said the PM asked him to behave in the same way as (former Speaker) Mashadani and to stop questioning the Trade Minister. According to the Speaker, the PM said "we cannot always do things in a legal way," and "if you raise the stakes, I will raise the stakes." Samarraie said he understood the PM to be warning him that if the questioning continued, Maliki would arrest people in Diyala. Samarraie's office also confirmed to Poloff that the PM has asked the CoR to lift the immunity of seven to ten MPs (including seven Tawafuq members).

¶6. (C) Among the wider CoR membership, there is a sense of tit-for-tat. PUK MP Friad Rwanduzi told Emboffs May 21 that the PM's Advisors had threatened to call Kurdish ministers in for questioning. Kurdish parliamentary leader Fuad Masoum (PUK/KAL) called their bluff, telling them that if these ministers were corrupt, the Kurds also wanted them out of government.

Elections - and Ratcheting up the Stakes

¶7. (C) Rikabi's comment about targeting Maliki coalition partners suggests that corruption will be an attractive election issue. Among the parties jumping on the anti-corruption bandwagon, is Fadhila, which according to Yonadem Kanna (Assyrian/Rafidayn) and Ahmed Mofeedh, Chief of Staff to Da'wa CoR leader Ali Adib, is one of the most corrupt parties in Iraq. Both insist that it is an election gambit by Fadhila, which did poorly in provincial elections.

Comment:

¶8. (C) The clash between Parliament and the Maliki-led administration is moving toward a pitched battle between the Iraqi Islamic Party and Da'wa, and perhaps a personal battle between Samarraie and Maliki. Some Iraqi interlocutors - both MPs and their staff - have told poloffs that the current debate harkens back to the struggle during the Speaker's

election. Samarraie's marshaling of CoR opposition to the GOI during the budget debate identified him as a strong leader, in limiting the discretionary funding of the Prime Minister's Office, and opened a political space that the IIP has exploited since Samarraie's election as Speaker. Significantly, both the Kurdish alliance and ISCI have joined with the IIP to check Maliki.

19. (C) Maliki appears to be responding, both in public anti-corruption efforts (including the recent arrest of ten Trade Ministry officials) and his actions against Sunni political leaders (reftels). He may fear a no-confidence vote in Parliament, although a more likely scenario is one-by-one targeting in the CoR of Maliki loyalists to force the prime minister either to overreact or concede some political ground to rival parties. Rikabi's comments likely indicate Maliki's nervousness about Samarraie's intentions. Whether Samarraie intends to methodically go after Maliki's government or not, the fact that Maliki believes this will shape his future political maneuvers toward Samarraie and the IIP, and even his travel schedule. End Comment.  
HILL